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ABSTRACT

In supporting independent or contextual reading, the principal can make a major difference in the lives of remedial and at-risk students. Initially, curricular congruence should be firmly established so that learning center staff and classroom teachers mutually support the use of school time for developing students' fluency. In addition, sustained silent reading and paired repeated reading are specific strategies to consider for remedial students who already have experienced failure. Conversely, maintenance of reading levels, reading recovery, and paired reading are useful suggestions for children who are at risk of failing. These approaches, if used positively, can benefit students in remedial and preventive ways. A perceptive principal will work cooperatively with teachers, guiding them to match the best approaches with the needs of students to develop fluency and lifetime reading habits. (Twenty-six references are attached.) (RS)

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Independent Reading for Remedial and
At-Risk Students: The Principal Can
Make a Difference

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One of the most important contributions an administrator can make to remedial and at-risk students is to support independent reading. Providing school time for free reading can help these students expand reading interests, build prior knowledge, and apply skills to text. Independent reading also can establish a foundation for developing the lifetime reading habit.

Unfortunately, remedial and corrective reading teachers often stress skill instruction rather than encourage contextual reading. According to Allington (1983, 1984), poor readers experience less text than good readers, and this difference in actual reading time may contribute to the difference in achievement between these two groups. Allington (1977) also argues in favor of increased reading during corrective and remedial instruction, and he suggests strategies for developing fluency in less able readers.

The building principal is a key player in promoting independent reading for remedial and at-risk students. Initially, he or she should articulate a strong belief in independent reading to students, teachers, parents, and board of education members. While demonstrating a concern for skill development and for state competency testing requirements, the principal focuses on a commitment to freeing children to read in school. Gradually, reasonable people begin to realize that students in general and problem learners in particular cannot

become proficient readers unless they have frequent opportunities to immerse themselves in text. With such a belief firmly grounded, the administrator can take steps toward supporting independent reading for less able readers.

Curricular Congruence

One of the first steps to be considered is to establish curricular congruence between the learning center and the classroom, especially if remedial instruction is not provided in the regular classroom. Briefly described, curricular congruence supports the need for stronger links in both remedial and classroom settings so that the content and strategies used for poor readers are similar. Otherwise, remedial students who need less quantity and more reinforcement of cohesive instruction may actually be exposed to many fragmented exercises that are unrelated to the classroom focus. (Allington, Boxer, and Broikou, 1987; Allington and Shake, 1986; Allington, Stuetzel, Shake, and Lamarche, 1986; Johnston, Allington, and Afflerbach, 1985; Sanacore, in press)

For example, the classroom teacher may be activating students' prior knowledge of concepts in a basal story; meanwhile, the remedial teacher may be stressing computer assisted instruction for grammar, spelling, vocabulary or other skills that do not support the basal story. Consequently, the poor readers are receiving too much potentially confusing instruction and also are experiencing minimal opportunities to

read connected text.

The principal can work toward correcting this problem by not only articulating a belief in curricular congruence but also relating it in feasible ways to independent reading. Adapting guidelines developed by Sanacore (in press), the administrator:

1. Schedules mutual planning time or arranges specific meetings so that both remedial and classroom teachers have an updated understanding of how students are approaching independent reading in both settings.

2. Encourages teachers to observe contextual reading activities in both environments.

3. Motivates remedial and classroom staff to use substantial instructional time for teacher-directed silent reading.

4. Supports the use of similar materials in both settings. Materials include content area textbooks, resources highlighting skills that are easily transferable, and workbooks with passages stressing comprehension.

5. Rewards teachers with formal recognition for using independent reading to complement the core instructional program. Such recognition can take place through observation reports, annual evaluations, "genuine" and specific letters of appreciation, and citations at faculty meetings.

6. Provides staff development workshops that focus on strategies for linking curricular congruence and independent

reading.

Sustained Silent Reading

When congruence has been feasibly associated with contextual reading, the principal continues guiding the staff in refining approaches that help students develop reading fluency. Sustained silent reading (McCracken, 1971) is one such approach that allows students to select materials in which they are interested and to read silently at their own comfortable rates. Reading time is provided in a structured context as individuals enjoy their selections for a designated period of time with no interruptions. Rather than correct papers or do other clerical tasks, the teacher models positive behavior by reading silently with the students.

For SSR to be a success, learning centers and classrooms (or library corners) must be well-stocked with a wide variety of materials. Trade books, content area textbooks, magazines, comics, and student-produced materials should be available. Remedial students are more likely to read these materials if they are written at varied levels, especially the students' independent levels as determined by an informal reading inventory. According to Harris (1978, p.920), students "in a remedial program seem to gain more from a large amount of easy reading than from a smaller amount of challenging reading." Harris also suggests that individuals should be able to read these materials with about 95% correct word recognition.

One of the many benefits of SSR is that it helps students

to perceive an important message that reading is a worthwhile activity everybody can do. (McCracken and McCracken, 1978) This message has special meaning for poor readers since they can make mistakes without worrying because no one is watching. (Vacca, Vacca, and Gove, 1987) Thus, they can engage in more risk-taking as they pursue reading fluency.

Although sustained silent reading is beneficial to both good and poor readers, it is meant to supplement rather than to supplant other necessary aspects of the reading program. May (1986, p.263) provides an appropriate caution:

As much as I want to encourage the use of an SSR program, however, I should caution you not to consider it a panacea. It's not some kind of cure-all; it's just a good supplement to a strong instructional program in interactive reading.

May (1986, p. 263) also believes that

Poor readers need a great deal of guided as well as independent reading. Some of this guided reading should be oral, some silent. In either case, the teacher should be directly involved in asking questions, clarifying meanings, and showing the children the cues available to them, both from the author and from their own schematic background. Furthermore, poor readers need more help than other children in selecting interesting and easy books to read on their own.

These thoughts should be helpful to the principal and teachers as they work toward including independent reading in a well-balanced instructional program. Certainly, remedial readers will benefit from direct instruction and from guidance in applying newly gained insights to contextual reading. These individuals also may need initial help when selecting books for pleasure reading. Such support, however, should not be overdone since even poor readers need experience developing their own metacognitive awareness and control of the reading act. Allowing some risk-taking demonstrates to students that adults have respect for their personal choices and personal approaches to reading. Consequently, these less able readers will probably develop more self-confidence in selecting materials and in responding to them. (Sanacore, 1988)

Paired Repeated Reading

Another strategy that provides poor readers with opportunities for contextual reading is paired repeated reading. (Koskinen and Blum, 1986) This adaptation of repeated reading has the potential for improving students' oral fluency and comprehension (Koskinen and Blum, 1984) and thus deserves the principal's consideration.

Typically, each student in the regular classroom works with a partner from the reading group. Individuals choose a short passage of about 50 to 75 words from material currently being used. After reading their passages silently, they

decide cooperatively who will be the first to read orally. Then, the first child reads aloud his/her passage three times and, after every oral reading, responds to the question: How well did you read? Meanwhile, the partner listens attentively and, after the second and third reading, provides the reader with positive feedback. Afterward, the individuals switch roles. (Koskinen and Blum, 1986)

To assure success with paired repeated reading, the classroom teacher introduces and models the strategy while focusing on the roles of reader and listener. The teacher also reinforces the strategy through supervised practice and continues supporting it by 1. guiding students to select short, interesting passages so that both listener and reader are attentive; 2. providing resources that are matched with students' independent reading level, thereby increasing the chances of fluency; 3. encouraging active listening by having the listener focus on positive comments on improvement; and 4. providing guidelines for cooperative learning, including taking turns and monitoring the purpose of the task.

The principal can support paired repeated reading in a variety of ways. During classroom observations, he or she assists several pairs of students, if necessary, to facilitate the roles of reader and listener. During post-observation conferences, the administrator compliments teachers' efforts

in using the strategy, offers pertinent suggestions for refining it, and seeks teachers' feedback for expanding its use. The principal also encourages teachers to discuss paired repeated reading at faculty meetings. Such efforts reinforce to the staff that fluent reading is an important goal for all students, including remedial learners, and that schoolwide support is needed and expected.

What about Prevention ?

Although remedial efforts are an important part of the schoolwide language arts program, the American education system is frequently criticized for stressing remediation instead of prevention. Millions of dollars are expended on remedial programs usually after students have already failed repeatedly, have developed a low academic self-concept, and have actually grown to dislike reading. What school administrators must do is accept the challenge of not only supporting efforts for less able learners but also implementing programs that prevent, or at least lessen, students' increased potential for failure. Cross-cultural practices provide insights concerning special interventions for at-risk children.

Maintenance of Reading Levels

One such intervention that supports reading fluency is referred to as maintenance of reading levels. (Phipps and Nielsen, 1987) Introduced in Denmark, this approach stresses

aspects of curricular congruence, whereby basals used in the regular classroom also are adhered to in the special reading course. At-risk children selected for special instruction meet with the reading teacher for 2 hours of daily instruction during a 10-week period. Each group is limited to five children, and they are selected for maintenance, not for remediation. Some of the daily activities include: engaging in oral practice of words and sentences that caused difficulty in the regular classroom; copying passages on widely lined paper and reading the passages to the teacher; noting and discussing errors or miscues from oral reading of the text; and reading assigned pages to parents at home until the passages are read fluently. Again the main purpose of this approach is to help at-risk children maintain comparable reading levels with peers in the regular classroom. According to Phipps and Nielsen (1987, p. 602), "it is commitment, organization, cooperation, and a clearly identifiable method which produce the fine results of 15-50% increase in reading levels for the Danish children who take this course." Although the United States cannot match the homogeneity of Denmark, maintenance of reading levels (or an adaptation) has potential for providing American children with opportunities to develop reading fluency within a relaxed, supportive environment.

Reading Recovery

Another intervention strategy to be considered by the principal is reading recovery. Similar in intent to the

maintenance concept, reading recovery was developed by Marie Clay of New Zealand. (Clay, 1985; Boehnlein, 1987) At-risk first graders are identified and given intensive instruction to improve their reading performance. Children meet with a trained reading recovery teacher for 30 minutes of daily instruction for about 15-20 weeks. The main goal of this program is to help children become independent readers so that they can learn comparably with classmates in the regular classroom. To accomplish this goal, the reading recovery teacher accelerates instruction through daily one-on-one lessons. Each child's program is individually developed, carefully monitored, and specifically sequenced. Within this context, the first graders are initially exposed to activities, such as observing the teacher modeling fluent reading and then reading short, easy books for the purpose of developing their own fluency. Afterward, the children engage in the rereading of easy books, in the writing of a story using natural language, and in other well-structured activities aimed at achieving independence.

The success of reading recovery is predicated on intensive teacher training. A one-year inservice program is conducted by a teacher leader, who also serves as a follow-up resource for the participating school. To demonstrate support for this innovation, the principal becomes involved with selecting personnel to be trained as reading recovery teachers. He or she also encourages classroom teachers and parents to

attend the sessions so that they can provide congruent support in advancing children's reading performance. Finally, the administrator facilitates the role of the teacher leader during the follow-up phase.

Thus far, reading recovery appears to be a success. Longitudinal research findings suggest that the vast majority of children in the program are able to perform comparably with average and above average readers in the regular classroom. (Clay, 1985) Successful outcomes also were observed in Ohio, the first American state to demonstrate a comprehensive commitment to reading recovery. (Boehnlein, 1987; Huck and Pinnell, 1985; Pinnell, 1986) Remarkably, most of the reading recovery children not only maintained their reading gains but also did not require remedial support again. This finding, by itself, should give administrators the impetus to investigate the usefulness of this innovation for a particular school.

Paired Reading

In the United Kingdom, paired reading is an effective method for involving parents with their children's reading. (Topping, 1987) This approach is not primarily intended for readers at risk of failing, but it has value for preventing potential failures. Currently, it is being used successfully with children between 6 and 13 years of age, and it also is being extended to the level of adult literacy. Paired reading

is designed for parents and their children in the home environment. The child selects reading material based on his or her interests and begins reading the source. If the text is difficult, the child and parent read aloud together until the child makes an error. After 5 seconds, the adult says the word until the child reads it correctly. This immediate support lessens the child's anxiety. For easier text, the child nonverbally signals to the parent to be quiet, while he or she reads independently. When an error is made, the correction strategy is repeated, and both adult and child read together again. According to Topping (1987, p.609), "There is much emphasis throughout on praise for correct reading, self-correction, and signalling to read alone."

An essential aspect of paired reading is orienting teachers and training parents about the method. Topping (1986b) produced a video training pack from which teachers can gain insights as well as practice them with cooperative children. Thus, teachers are fully aware of the method. For economic reasons, parents and children are trained together at a group meeting. A short lecture and written materials are combined with a demonstration of paired reading. Then, the parents and children practice the method and receive feedback. Afterward, the technique is used at home for an "initial period of commitment" ranging from 6-8 weeks. Finally, the "intensive phase of the project" is implemented which involves monitoring parents and children practicing the method.

For this innovation to be carried out successfully, the principal's support is necessary. Coordinating efforts concerning the various levels of orientation is a primary leadership responsibility. In addition, the principal may decide that although paired reading is used mostly in the home, it can be adapted to the school. In this context, at-risk children are identified and provided with intensive one-on-one instruction in the learning center. Each child is matched with a reading teacher, a special education teacher, or an older student tutor. Paired reading takes place about 30 minutes each day (based on the child's attending ability). The child selects reading materials independently and reads difficult and easy text, using similar strategies discussed above. The building principal monitors this adaptation and also encourages parents to observe their children in the learning center. Consequently, they are in a better position to reinforce paired reading at home.

Thus far, research findings are supportive of this method. (Topping, 1986a, 1987; Topping and Wolfendale, 1985) Children engaged in paired reading make significant progress in reading accuracy and in reading comprehension. In addition, parents' subjective responses to questionnaires suggest that the vast majority of their children involved in paired reading

not only were reading more materials but also were reading more diversity of sources. These parents also reported an increase in enthusiasm, confidence, and other related areas.

These three cross-cultural considerations are aimed at prevention rather than remediation. Maintenance of reading levels, reading recovery, and paired reading provide the type of support that lessens children's potential for failure. If carried out appropriately, these approaches require extra funding, especially for staffing. The extra money that is needed, however, will result in less cost for future remediation, and the principal should stress this position when proposing budgets for additional staffing.

Summary

In supporting independent or contextual reading, the principal can make a major difference in the lives of remedial and at-risk students. Initially, curricular congruence should be firmly established so that learning center staff and classroom teachers mutually support the use of school time for developing students' fluency. In addition, sustained silent reading and paired repeated reading are specific considerations for remedial students who already have experienced failure. Conversely, maintenance of reading levels, reading recovery, and paired reading are useful suggestions for children who are at risk of failing. Interestingly, all these approaches, if

used positively, can benefit students in remedial and preventive ways. A perceptive instructional leader will work cooperatively with teachers, guiding them to match the best approaches with the needs of students. Such efforts can be used for either prevention or remediation as they simultaneously encourage both fluency and the lifetime reading habit.

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